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Telugu Jews: Are the Dalits of coastal Andhra going caste-awry?

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In the context of religious conversion movements of low castes in India, many Dalit groups have embraced Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and even Jainism in order to restore egalitarian traditions. However, their conversion to Judaism is relatively unheard of in the academia. This essay throws light on the nature of these conversions by looking at a section of Dalit population in the coastal Andhra, who embraced Judaism two decades ago by declaring their community to be the descendants of the Children of Ephraim – one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

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Who are the Bene Ephraim?

In 1991, two Madiga brothers, Shmuel and Sadok Yacobi, established a synagogue in the village of Kothareddypalem in Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh. According to the Yacobi brothers, their parents in private identified as descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, and passed on this knowledge to their children. However, in public, they practiced Christianity, like the rest of their Madiga neighbours. Initially, they were joined by about thirty Madiga families. Subsequently, they introduced a number of Jewish rites into the practice of their congregation – the community started observing a number of Jewish festivals and rites of passage, and meeting weekly in the synagogue for Sabbath. This meant avoiding work on Saturdays, which most community members found difficult to follow due to the nature of their work as agricultural labourers. Registering a synagogue in Kothareddypalem meant for the Yacobis a formal break from Christianity and an end to the support provided by foreign Christian donors (Francisco 1998).¹

What is the social background of the Bene Ephraim? Madiga untouchables – the community they stem from – probably have the lowest status in Andhra Pradesh. Madigas have traditionally been associated with shoe-making

and agricultural labour and continue to do so even today. Demographically, the Madigas constitute 46.94% of the total scheduled caste population of the state, which, according to the 2001 census, is placed at twelve million. Like many Dalit histories, the history of Madigas is hidden and obscure too. Madiga legends of origin connect the community to Jambavant, a figure in the epic of Ramayana, and explain that the low status of his descendants was due to a mistake or a curse (Singh 1969: 5-6). In the twentieth century, the Madiga leaders revised some of these legends to improve the image of the community. The new origin narratives emphasise the antiquity and aboriginality of the Madiga, portraying them as the oldest inhabitants of the region and as former rulers of the country, who were defeated and had to accept the subordinate position in which they stayed until today (Singh 1969: 7-9).

New narratives of origin?

The claims of the Bene Ephraim could be considered a variation of such new narratives. Their account of the Israelite past of the community is detailed in a book called ‘Cultural Hermeneutics’, written by Shmuel Yacobi after a decade of library research and travel to Israel and the USA. It is asserted in the book that all the scheduled castes of southern India, and possibly even of the entire

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the Bene Ephraim practices see Egorova and Perwez 2012. The material is derived from a year long ethnographic fieldwork conducted between June 2009 and May 2010 in coastal Andhra.

sub-continent, are the descendants of the Bene Ephraim (Yacobi 2002). The book contains three principle themes which have informed the problematic of the community's current self-identification – the story of their migration from ancient Israel, narratives explaining how the Bene Ephraim became untouchables, and representations of their relationship with caste Hindus. Each theme can be linked to broader discourses, which emerged outside of the historical and social boundaries of the community, such as the centuries-old Lost Tribes discourse, constructions of a 'higher status' origin produced by different scheduled castes of India, and anti-caste rhetoric of the Dalit movement.

'Cultural Hermeneutics' suggests that the ancestors of Bene Ephraim are the descendants of some of the Tribes of Israel, who in 722 BCE were exiled from the ancient kingdom of Israel by Assyria. After a sojourn in Persia, they were moved to the northern part of the subcontinent, which was then populated by Dravidian groups including Telugu speaking communities. As Bene Ephraim, they established good relations with them and made an impact on their religions and cultures. A large part of the book is devoted to the description of the alleged similarities between Hebrew and Telugu languages, which according to Shmuel Yacobi, was a result of this influence. The story continues in the seventh century BCE, when the 'Aryans', who

established the caste system and relegated both the Dravidians and Bene Ephraim to the positions of Shudras and untouchables respectively, conquered the subcontinent. They were later moved to the South of India, where they reside at the moment as untouchables, along with other Dravidians. According to Yacobi, the ancient texts that laid the foundation of the current Hindu tradition, such as the Vedas and the Upanishads, contain the knowledge that was 'stolen' by ancient Aryans from the Dravidians and the Bene Ephraim. The current state of affairs in the community is explained as an unfortunate result of the further advance of the 'Aryan rule' under which the Bene Ephraim lost their status and political significance, were reduced to extreme poverty, and, left with no means of maintaining their tradition, almost forgot it.

Jews or Dalits?

Should the Judaising movement of this Madiga group, therefore, be understood as a novel strategy to raise their social status in the local hierarchy by creating a story about more distinguished origins and a prestigious status, which for one reason or another had been lost?

Writing about Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, Gauri Viswanathan conceptualizes it as a process through which social classes who were denied access to power sought 'a course of action that *preserved* rather than eradicated

difference' (emphasis original, Viswanathan 1998: 213). Viswanathan describes Ambedkar's conversion as 'a form of political and cultural criticism' and as 'a clear political statement of dissent against the identities constructed by the state' (ibid.). At the same time, she contends that Ambedkar was not just reacting to the authorities, but 'exploring the possibilities offered by conversion (especially to "minority" religions) in developing an alternative epistemological and ethical foundation for a national community' (ibid.). Robinson and Kujursimilarly posit that conversions in India are often associated with dissent and resistance (2003: 15).

The Yacobi brothers refuse to describe the Judaisation of the Bene Ephraim as a conversion movement. Shmuel, in particular, prefers to call it a *teshuvah*, or a process through which Jews who discontinued practicing Judaism in the past are rediscovering the tradition of their ancestors. The brothers, as well as other Bene Ephraim we talked to, are also adamant that their Judaisation should not be viewed as a mere attempt at escaping the caste system. However, it appears that Shmuel's research into the Israelite past of his community was partly motivated by his desire to free the Bene Ephraim from caste inequality. Shmuel often recounted to us how, like other Madiga, he was discriminated against in the job market with very few occupations being open to him, despite the fact that he had achieved

good results at school. In the village, the dominant Reddy caste tried to prevent the appointment of his father to the post of English teacher. His mother told him stories of how she was made to sit separately in school, often outside the classroom, and forced to use the sand floor to write, instead of writing on a slate or a board. The local tea and food shop keepers in the village served them through the backdoor of the shop – if they ever served them at all –, fearing a backlash from high caste villagers.

When Shmuel was a young man, he himself was once refused a glass of water by a Hindu neighbour, who belonged to a higher caste. He describes this episode as a starting point for his research into the Bene Ephraim past:

'When I started my education, one day I was thirsty. I went to a nearby Hindu house and asked, 'Give me some water'. They know my parents, my grandmother. But some of them are uneducated Hindu people. They may not recognize me or my parents. They said, 'Who are you?' It is a general question in Andhra Pradesh... We have to tell our caste. I said, 'I am the son of the headmaster.' They said, 'Oh, you are Madiga'. They brought some water and poured it like this [to make sure I don't touch the cup]. That was the first time in my life to face those things. Before that my parents would tell me, but I did not know

what it was like for them in practice...

From that day I took it as a challenge. I started praying to God and I started asking several people, 'What is this caste system? What is this discrimination? In Babylonian exile the Jewish people had to say, 'We are unclean'. The same situation was here... So, that's how that began...²

It was thus a protest against caste inequality that marked the beginning of his return to Judaism. His *teshuvah* became both a way of connecting to the wider Jewish community and a socio-cultural critique of the caste system, a critique which (to build on Viswanathan's terms) preserved and expanded the idea about the Madiga being different from the 'pure' castes.

To succeed in the project of embracing Judaism, the Bene Ephraim do not need to seek the endorsement of higher castes. Their movement is outwardly oriented enough to be overly dependent on local caste relations. 'Mahatmaji, I have no country', uttered Ambedkar as he left his first meeting with Gandhi in 1931, when the latter opposed the demands of the untouchables on sharing political power with the Indian National Congress (Viswanathan 1998: 219). The discourse of Shmuel Yacobi echoes Ambedkar's words of desperation. In the context of the Bene Ephraim movement these

words acquire a literal meaning. If Ambedkar encouraged Indian Dalits to convert to a religion which was different from that of Indian society's dominant layers, but had still originated on the subcontinent, Shmuel Yacobi took a step further. Judaism is a religion which is not just 'foreign' to India, but a religion which can potentially set the community on a path towards leaving India and obtaining citizenship in a different country. Like Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders, Shmuel Yacobi feels that his community is politically disempowered in India. He is pessimistic about dominant groups responding to the demands of the untouchables and refuses to leave the project of Dalit liberation in the hands of the upper castes. However, unlike Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders, he is prepared to take a new and distinctly radical step to fight inequality. He does not just dissociate the Bene Ephraim rhetorically from the tradition of the higher castes, but prepares them to leave India for a different state, a place where, he argues, they won't feel they have no country.

And yet, though the community's Judaisation can be read as a way of rejecting the tradition of the dominant groups (to the extent of possible emigration), it also provided the Bene Ephraim with a means to honour and celebrate those features of their cultural practices of which higher castes are contemptuous. Shmuel Yacobi has conjectured that ancient Israelite theology and practices of

²Personal communication, Machilipatnam, 7 January 2010.

his ancestors were stolen from them by the ‘Aryans’ and thus shaped the whole of Hinduism. For instance, he argues that many Telugu Hindu festivals have their analogues in the main Jewish holidays – the Hindus first learnt about these festivals from the Bene Ephraim, and once the latter came to be declared untouchables as a punishment for their resistance to the caste system, the Hindus prohibited them to practise these rites. In Shmuel Yacobi’s view, by celebrating Jewish holidays, the Madiga are returning to their roots and reclaiming what was theirs in the first place. However, Shmuel Yacobi also suggests that the Madiga and other Dalits did manage to remember and keep at least two Jewish traditions which later became the main markers of their untouchability – the customs of beef-eating and of burying their dead.

Most community members claim to command the knowledge of *shehitah*,³ and say that they can make any meat kosher. However, in the discourse of the Bene Ephraim, *kashrut* means much more than Jewish dietary laws. When talking about the Bene Ephraim practice of eating kosher meat, the Yacobis particularly stress their knowledge of how to make buffalo meat kosher. According to Shmuel Yacobi, the fact that the Scheduled Castes of India possessed the knowledge about beef-eating – a practice which caste Hindus consider to be

ritually polluting – is further evidence of their connection to the ancient Israelites.

Similar instances of Dalit groups reinterpreting practices associated with untouchability into positive ‘identity markers’ have been well documented by anthropologists of South Asia. David Mosse has described the way Christian Dalit thinkers participate in honouring Dalit cultures through the re-conceptualisation of ‘outcaste’ practices – for instance, introducing drumming into Christian liturgy and promoting beef-eating and drumming in Jesuit schools (Mosse 2010: 254). Still has discussed how beef-eating is celebrated by the Madiga of coastal Andhra, who re-signify it from a repudiated practice into a positive symbol of Dalit culture (Still 2007). Similarly, when the Yacobis speak about the importance of observing the laws of *kashrut*, they not only try to establish a ritual connection with other Jewish communities around the world, but also to glorify the Madiga tradition. Buffalo meat becomes both a symbol of their rediscovered Jewish past, and a site of Dalit activism.

Marking the end of life with a burial is another practice that, according to the Yacobis, connects Dalits to Judaism. ‘This is what the Madiga used to do even before Christian missionaries arrived, and it is a Hebrew custom’, Shmuel Yacobi told us. We did not observe any funerals in the village, yet we were taken to the local Christian Madiga cemetery,

³Ritual animal slaughter in Judaism, which ensures that the meat of the slaughtered animal is kosher.

where the tombs of deceased Bene Ephraim are marked with the same Jewish symbols as their houses – Stars of David, signs symbolizing the menorah, the words ‘Zion’ and ‘Shaddai’ written in Hebrew. The Madiga cemetery in itself is described by the Bene Ephraim as further evidence for their Hebrew origin. They pride themselves on their practice of burying their dead, which is different from the cremating practice of caste Hindus, reinterpreting this practice as a tradition passed down to them by their Israelite ancestors. As it is the case with observing *kashrut*, the Madiga cemetery symbolises for the Bene Ephraim both their Jewish past and their Dalit heritage. It becomes both a new site in what Shalva Weil described as ‘Indian Jewish topographies’ (2009), and a prominent place of Madiga cultural history.

Shmuel Yacobi’s attempts at establishing a connection of belief and practice between untouchables and Judaism could be considered in the context of other Dalit conversion movements, as well as against the backdrop of Dalit activists’ rhetoric associating the cultures of Scheduled Castes with ‘non-Indian’ traditions and dissociating them from Hinduism. As the Dalit activist KanchaIlaiah put it denouncing the Hindutva⁴ ideologues’ anti-Muslim and anti-Christian stance,

What do we, the lower Sudras and Ati-Sudras... have to do with Hinduism or with Hindutva itself?.. We heard about *Turukoolu* (Muslims), we heard about *Kirastanapoolu* (Christians), we heard about *Baapanoolu* (Brahmins) and *Koomatoolu* (Baniyas) spoken of as people who are different from us. Among these four categories, the most different were the Baapanoolu and the Koomatoolu. There are at least some aspects of life common to us and the Turukoolu and Kirastanapoolu. We all eat meat, we all touch each other... (1996: xi).

Like Kancha Ilaiah, Shmuel Yacobi explicitly dissociates Dalit culture from Hinduism, but he also distances it from Christianity with its Universalist message which did not help his ancestors to escape the stigma of untouchability. Instead, he offers his Madiga followers a religion that has its own tradition of applying different laws of ritual purity to different categories of persons. To return to the ethnographic context of the community’s life in the village, insisting on eating kosher provides the Bene Ephraim with a mechanism to separate their congregants ritually from the Christian Madiga and ensures that their neighbours are more likely to become aware of their Jewishness. We could sometimes observe Bene Ephraim refusing to eat in the houses of other villagers on the grounds that the food prepared in their homes

⁴Hindutva, which could be translated as 'Hinduness', is a term used to describe Hindu nationalism. The term was coined by VinayakDamodarSavarkar in 1923.

was not kosher. Just like caste Hindus refuse food prepared by the Madiga, the Bene Ephraim now have dietary prohibitions of their own to which they subject their non-Jewish neighbours. Towards the end of his fieldwork Shahid observed another example of the Bene Ephraim trying to gradually distance themselves from other villagers. Sadok Yacobi arranged for a separate building to be constructed in the synagogue courtyard – the building was supposed to serve as an office where non-Jewish visitors would report upon arrival. Sadok Yacobi explained to Shahid that it was not appropriate for the ‘outsiders’ to enter the synagogue if they wanted to see him, and he needed to have a specially dedicated structure to accommodate such visits. He thus constructed a new spatial boundary to separate his house of worship from the rest of the village, which allowed him to grant entry rights to some villagers and deny them to others, just like the Hindus would refuse to let him into their temples.

In seeking ways to rediscover the lost tradition, the Bene Ephraim thus both deploy the tropes of ‘Jewish difference’ borrowed from Western discourses. In the Bene Ephraim discourse – which emerged in the writings of Shmuel Yacobi but rapidly spread in and outside the village – being Jewish, amongst other things, means being Madiga. It means to eat beef and to bury one’s dead, to denounce inequality and to fight caste discrimination 🏠

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